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Language and knowledge construction in India*

(published in: *Sprache und Wissenserwerb / Language and Acquisition of Knowledge*, ed. Ada Neschke & Hans Rainer Sepp, Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2011 (Philosophische Anthropologie, Themen und Positionen, 5) pp. 139-148)

Studying the thought of a culture different from our own is a tricky affair. It is obvious that Indian culture, to stick to this example right from the beginning, has produced an extensive literature on topics which, on a superficial level, we may be tempted to call scientific, linguistic, or philosophical. However, when one looks more closely at this literature, and the thought it gives expression to, one will discover that beside superficial resemblances there are many differences. This will not deter most scholars from calling Indian texts "medical" if they deal with diseases and how to cure them. Similarly, texts that deal with the stars and other heavenly bodies are commonly called "astronomical" in spite of whatever differences there are between the ideas propounded in the Indian texts and those common in the Western tradition. And no one objects against the designation "linguistic" for Indian texts that obviously deal with the study and analysis of language. However, about philosophy in India there are divergent opinions. Some scholars, usually western philosophers, claim that there is no such thing as Indian philosophy, and that there cannot possibly be. Philosophy, they maintain, is Western by its very nature, and things that look superficially similar to it in other cultures, e.g. in India, should be called "eastern wisdom" or something of the kind, never "philosophy".

It has to be admitted that philosophy differs in a rather fundamental manner from medicine, astronomy and linguistics. In the case of these last three, it is obvious what they are about: medicine is about diseases and their cures, and by extension about the human body; astronomy is about the stars and other heavenly bodies; linguistics is about language. But what is philosophy about? The word suggests that it is about wisdom. There is no need to emphasize that wisdom is something far less objective, less tangible, than the diseases, the stars, and language, the topics dealt with in the various sciences. What is wisdom in one [140] culture is not necessarily wisdom in another. Others may prefer to understand the word

* This paper is largely based on some other publications of mine: Bronkhorst 1992 and Bronkhorst 1999.

philosophy differently, but whatever the precise interpretation, it seems clear that philosophy is more culture-dependent, even in its subject-matter, than the sciences I enumerated.

As a general rule I agree with Humpty Dumpty, who said: "When *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."[1] In other words, everyone is free to use the word *philosophy* as he or she wishes. So if someone reserves this word for certain developments that belong exclusively to the West, and refuses to use it for rather similar developments that have taken place elsewhere in the world, I cannot object in principle. But I can, and do, make a practical objection. In practice, those who deny that there is such a thing as Indian philosophy do so, more often than not, in order to indicate the superiority of Western philosophy to comparable developments elsewhere, notably in India. Their choice of terminology — *philosophy* for the West, *eastern wisdom* for India and other cultures — gives expression to the kind of eurocentrism which has no other justification than lack of familiarity with other traditions. I am of the opinion that little is gained, and much good-will and possibility of understanding lost, by being exclusive with the use of the word philosophy. India, like Europe, had medicine, astronomy, linguistics, mathematics, and much else. India, like Europe, had philosophy, too.

Claiming that India had philosophy is not without risks. To see why, it will be useful to cite what Roy Porter had to say about the identification of science with philosophy:[2] "if science is ultimately philosophical, it is no surprise that philosophers should claim the right to analyse past science — a tendency which, given the predominant ahistorical bent of Anglo-American philosophy, has often proved disastrous for proper historical interpretation. In particular the philosophers' itch to reconstruct the rationality of great texts has characteristically played a fast-and-loose with historical contexts and meanings, and has encouraged anachronistic evaluations of rationality and irrationality in the history of science." Much the same could be said about the dangers, and the sometimes disastrous consequences, of the philosophical study of Indian philosophy. All too easily this leads to "a fast-and-loose with historical contexts and meanings", and encourages "anachronistic evaluations of rationality and irrationality" in Indian philosophy.

Arguing for the use of the term philosophy for India, then, is not the same as claiming that Indian philosophers did more or less the same as what Western [141] philosophers did (and do). The European philosophical tradition, in the words of Alfred North Whitehead,

[1] Carroll 1970, 269.
[2] Porter 1986, as quoted Oster 2002, 283.

consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.[3] This may be an exaggeration, or even plain wrong, but it does remind us of the fact that India has never known Plato, nor any of the other philosophers that are considered classical in the West. This, in its turn, means that Indian philosophical thinking had its own traditions, quite different from those that belong to the West. As a result it occupied itself often with different questions.

The practical consequence of these reflections is as follows. If one wishes to study a specific more or less philosophical issue from the point of view of the philosophical traditions in different cultures, one should be prepared, not only to find different and unexpected *answers* in the culture one is less familiar with. Indian philosophy is not just a tradition of different answers to the same questions. The difference goes deeper. Indian philosophy often asks an altogether different *question*, and may therefore propose no answer to the question the Western philosopher may be interested in. Understanding Indian philosophy implies, in such cases, more than understanding different answers to our questions, but understanding that the Indian philosophers asked different questions, and why they did so.

The topic of this symposium illustrates what I am trying to say. This topic is: "Language and the construction of knowledge". I will try to show in this lecture that this would be a questionable topic in India, at least during the early period of Indian philosophy. For many Indian thinkers, a much more suitable topic would have been: Language and the construction of reality. Let me try to explain why.

Herodotus tells us the story of the Egyptian pharaoh called Psammetichos, who was in search of the very first human language. In order to find it, he ordered a child to be brought up without anyone being allowed to talk to it, so as to find out, without external influence, what will be its first language. At the end of this experiment, Psammetichos is told that the Phrygians, rather than the Egyptians, are in the possession of the oldest language. The proof is that the child has asked for *bèkos*, which means bread in Phrygian.

Philippe Borgeaud, who reminds us of this story in his book *Aux origines de l'histoire des religions*,[4] is careful to add that this is a Greek rather than an Egyp-[142]tian tale. In reality, the Egyptians were convinced that their own language, Egyptian, was the very first human language. From their point of view, all foreign languages are corruptions,

[3] Whitehead 1979, 39: "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato."

[4] Borgeaud 2004, 51. Note that in India the Mughal Emperor Akbar tried a similar experiment, but apparently with less success, judging by what the English traveller Peter Mundy tells us about it: "Within 3 *Course* of Fatehpur there is a ruinated building, named Gonga *Mohol*, that is the 'house of the dumb', built by King Akbar of purpose, where hee caused little children to be brought up by dumb Nurses to know what language they would naturally speak, but it is sayd that in a long time they spake nothing at all." (Fisher 2007, 78).

malformations, distortions of the only conceivable language, i.e. of Egyptian, and that from the beginning of time (p. 50).

The Greeks differed from the Egyptians in not having this absolute conviction that their own language was the original language. Some of them, among them Herodotus, were ready to accept that the real names of the gods, that is to say the names that are closest to the nature of those gods, had come from Egypt. At the same time they sometimes proposed explanations of Egyptian names of gods with the help of Greek etymologies or, the other way round, they proposed Egyptian etymologies for Greek names of gods (p. 53-54).

It appears from all this that the Greeks, unlike the Egyptians, were confronted with a multitude of languages each of which had an equal right to the claim of being the original language, i.e., the language closest to objective reality. Like the Egyptians, the Brahmins in India had no doubt whatsoever that their own language, Sanskrit, was the original language, and therefore the language which is closest to the nature of things.

This conviction was supported by various considerations. Brahmins are different from other human beings for a number of reasons, central among these the fact that they are in the possession of the Veda. The Veda is primarily a collection of powerful formulas, called *mantra*s. Brahmins use these formulas in order to realize certain aims in this life or beyond. They also put their power at the disposal of others — e.g., the king — by executing rites that are accompanied by Vedic formulas. No one in India doubted the supernatural, or magical, effects of these formulas; the Brahmins themselves had no doubts in this respect, but nor did those whom they had persuaded to accept their services. These effects were believed to be due to the fact that the language of these formulas is the divine language, Sanskrit.

Philosophical thought in ancient India was not the exclusive domain of Brahmins. As a matter of fact, the history of ancient Indian thought is to a large extent the history of an ongoing dispute between Brahmanical and Buddhist thinkers. The Buddhists did *not* identify with the Sanskrit language the way the Brahmins did; for them Sanskrit was *not* the divine language. Yet the Buddhists [143] had reasons of their own to develop ideas about the link between language and reality. I will first sketch these Buddhist ideas, before returning to the Brahmins.

The Buddhists, for reasons that cannot be discussed in this lecture, had developed an altogether remarkable atomistic ontology, already before the beginning of the Common Era. They had interpreted the words of the Buddha — the founder of their religion and someone whom they considered omniscient — as saying that the world of our experience is not real. The objects which we encounter in our daily lives — such as houses, vehicles, and even

persons — do not really exist. All these objects are nothing but accumulations of ultimate constituents. These ultimate constituents they called *dharma*s, and they thought that they were not only the ultimate constituents of the material world, but of the mental world as well. Complete lists of these *dharma*s, they believed, were to be found in the words of the Buddha. These *dharma*s, moreover, were conceived of as being momentary. This means that each *dharma* exists no longer than one single moment, after which it is replaced by a succeeding *dharma*. This thoroughly atomistic vision of the world was accompanied by the claim that accumulations of *dharma*s have no separate existence. The objects of our daily experience — which are all of them accumulations of countless *dharma*s — do not therefore exist.

This is no more than the skeleton of an ontology, and Buddhist thinkers made great efforts to elaborate and refine it. But however much one elaborates and refines this ontology, it will always keep one major weakness, namely, that the non-existence of composite objects is among its most fundamental claims. In other words, the objects which we encounter on a daily basis, and which are the essential ingredients of our normal life — I have already enumerated houses, cars, and persons, but one could add to this list almost without limit —, all these objects do not exist. Apparently we are all the victims of a colossal mistake. How can this be explained?

Buddhist doctors of the period proposed the following answer. We are the victims of language. We believe that we live in a house, because of the word “house”; in reality there is no house. We think that we travel in cars, because the word “car” is used, but there is in fact no car. In this way language introduces itself into Buddhist thought. There is no relation, for these Buddhists, between language and reality. But there is a relation between language and the imagined world which we believe, incorrectly, to inhabit.

It will be clear that for the Buddhist thinkers just described language plays no role in the construction of knowledge. Or rather, the knowledge that we construct with the help of language is incorrect knowledge, which has nothing to do with reality. Put more crudely, language is responsible for leading us into [144] error. These Buddhists, if we could ask them, would reject the topic of our symposium as misleading. The topic “Language and the construction of knowledge” suggests that language does or can play a role in the construction of knowledge. In reality, these Buddhists would say, language does the opposite: it misleads us and takes us away from knowledge.

Let us now return to the Brahmins. The opposition between Brahmins and Buddhists was total. The two represented visions of society that were at opposite extremes, and they were in constant competition to obtain favours from those in possession of political power.

We all know from experience that philosophical thought is not the best way to obtain such favours. Those in charge are rarely impressed by the intellectual efforts of abstract thinkers. And yet, certain Brahmins thought that, beside many other things, they were obliged to criticize the theoretical thought of these Buddhists. Criticizing their ideas implied: proposing something better instead.

Recall now that Sanskrit, for the Brahmins, is the language which is closest to reality. For Brahmins is was therefore inacceptable to entertain the idea that the Sanskrit language might lead them into error. Quite the contrary, Sanskrit gives privileged access to reality. The deeper we study this language, the better we can understand objective reality. Once again, it would not be correct to state that Sanskrit helps us in the construction of correct knowledge. No, reality itself has been constructed in accordance with this language. Some would go so far as to say that reality has been constructed by the Sanskrit language.

It may be clear from what I have just said that the expression “construction of knowledge”, which occurs in the title of this symposium, is barely applicable to the Brahmanical position we are considering. Seen from this point of view, we do not construct, with or without the help of language, knowledge of an allegedly objective reality. No, objective reality itself has been constructed following a scheme which we can discover by studying the Sanskrit language.

According to the Buddhist position we have considered, language leads us into error; it makes us believe in a world — the world of our daily experience — which does not really exist. Our Brahmins felt obliged to maintain the opposite, namely, that the Sanskrit language is the best means to get to know reality. Both Buddhists and Brahmins agreed however on one important point, viz., that the world of our daily experience has been structured by language. They disagreed about the reality of this common-sense world: it was unreal according to the Buddhists, real according to the Brahmins.

One important Brahmanical school of thought has made major efforts to draw the full consequences of their theoretical position. They have developed — perhaps they would prefer to say, unveiled — a vision of reality which is largely [145] determined by language (which means, by Sanskrit). This has led to the creation of a very complex system of thought, of which only an extremely superficial sketch can be presented here.

To start from the beginning. Sanskrit, like many other languages, has various kinds of words, among them, most notably, nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Our Brahmins concluded from this that objective reality contains things that correspond to these three kinds of words. These are — you have no doubt guessed it already — what are called substances, qualities

and activities. They also figure in Aristotle's list of categories, but it is practically certain that our Brahmanical thinkers have not borrowed them from the Greek philopher. Moreover, the Brahmins included these three categories in a longer list, which they believed to be an exhaustive enumeration of all that exists. They no doubt did so because their eternal adversaries, the Buddhists, had provided a complete list of all there is, viz., the list of *dharma*s.

It is not difficult to imagine that those who developed and elaborated this ontological scheme saw themselves confronted with major difficulties. The resulting system is indeed complex, but modern researchers who take the trouble of familiarizing themselves with it in depth have to admit that the thinkers of this particular school have done an impressive job. What interests us at this moment is to see how the postulate of a close proximity between langage and reality manifests itself in this system, sometimes in unexpected ways. For example, the fundamental texts of this Brahmanical school maintain from time to time that the existence of this or that object explains the use of this or that word. Or the other way round, the presence of a certain word shows that the corresponding object exists. A simple but significant example is the following: The existence of a soul is indicated by the personal pronoun "I", and the fact that this personal pronoun is never used in apposition with the word "earth" (one never says "I am earth") proves that the soul is different from the body (the body being thought of as a form of earth). Qualities like happiness are qualities of the soul, not of the body, because one says "I am happy" and not "the body is happy".

I have already pointed out that Brahmins and Buddhists both agreed that there is a close parallelism between language and the world of our experience. We know that there was yet a major difference between the two. For the Brahmins we have considered, the world of our experience is the real world. For the Buddhists that we are dealing with, the world of our experience is in parallel with language because it is the result of a confusion that is created by language. Both positions are possible, and it is at first sight not easy to determine which of the two positions is correct, and which one is false. Thinkers of the period concerned have [146] yet tried, and once again it was the Buddhists who took the initiative. They *proved* that the world of our experience cannot be real. Why so? Because, if one accepts that the world of our experience is real, one is confronted with unresolvable contradictions.

The most famous Buddhist thinker to draw attention to some of the contradictions that cannot be dissociated from the common sense world is called Nagarjuna. He has often been compared with the Eleatics, such as Zeno, but the comparison is superficial. Nagarjuna

worked in an Indian context which was altogether different from the Greek context of the Eleatics. Nagarjuna's arguments fit the Indian situtation of his time; they would not have had the same success in ancient Greece.

Which are the arguments of Nagarjuna? Nagarjuna draws the ultimate consequences of the Brahmanical position of his time. His point of departure is that language and reality correspond closely to each other. This implies, as we have seen, that there is a thing in the world for each word, and a word for each thing. But it is possible to go further, and Nagarjuna does so. Language does not consist of mere words. Words are grouped in sentences, primarily propositions or statements. Difficulties arise in connection with these. There is no problem in the case of a simple proposition such as "the student reads a book". This proposition consists, in Sanskrit, of three words, which designate, respectively, the student, the activity of reading, and the book. One might conclude from this that the words that make up a proposition correspond, one by one, to the "things" that constitute the situation depicted by that proposition. I call this principle the "correspondence principle"; it accounts very satisfactorily for the relationship between propositions and the situations they depict. On condition, that is, that one chooses one's propositions with care. The same principle leads to difficulties in the case of other propositions.

Let me give an example. The correspondence principle leads to difficulties in the case of the following proposition: "the potter makes a pot". At first sight, no proposition could be simpler or more straightforward. Yet problems arise as soon as one tries to specify which things in the situation depicted correspond to the words of this proposition. This situation should contain a potter, the activity of making, and a pot. But there is no pot in this situation! If there were, there would be no need for the potter to make one. Examples of problematic propositions of this kind can be multiplied virtually without limit. Each proposition that concerns the production or manifestation of an object will give rise to essentially the same problem.

Modern research has taken a long time to find out what exactly is the problem in propositions like this. The problem was not clear, because our presuppo-[147]sitions are not the same as those of Indian thinkers fifteen or more centuries ago. We do not believe in the principle of correspondence. The Indian thinkers of that time believed in it, all of them, whether consciously or unconsciously. The type of argument presented by Nagarjuna was therefore a source of embarrassment for practically everyone. He himself concluded from the fact that a potter cannot make a pot, that no pot is produced. More generally, he held that nothing is ever produced, and if we have the impression that things *are* produced, too bad for

our impression. Being a Buddhist, the idea that the world of our experience does not exists suited him quite well.

For Nagarjuna's opponents, whether Brahmins or other thinkers of that time, this conclusion was inacceptable. These thinkers were not of the opinion that the world of our experience does not exist. At the same time, they felt obliged to admit that Nagarjuna's argument was difficult to refute, and at bottom correct (or almost correct). Like him, they accepted the principle of correspondence, implicitly or explicitly. As a result they were confronted with the challenge to show that, in spite of Nagarjuna's arguments, the world of our experience can and does exist.

This is not the occasion to discuss in what ways these other thinkers tried to save the common sense world. One can say that this challenge was one of the driving forces behind the development of Indian thought during the first half of the first millennium, and led to multiple and varied responses. In this debate the question as to which is the role of language in the construction of our knowledge of the world, or rather in the construction of the world itself, plays of course a major role. An analysis of the resulting positions would however take us too far. For this reason I will stop here.

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